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ABSTRACT

This report describes an approach to self-access work with first-year college students at Hong Kong University, explains the rejection to this approach, and outlines the current development of study guides for students in line with the adoption of an approach that seeks to provide a guided independence for students. The idea behind the study guides is that students can use them as models of how to plan their own schemes of work. They are meant primarily to be an initiation to self-direction. Students at Hong Kong University were asked to create their own study guides, which met with varying degrees of success. Only two groups of students were able to develop a study guide. It was found that some students were not yet ready for self-access learning. (JL)

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Reports

ED 365 124

Using Study Guides: An Approach To Self-Access

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Introduction

When I arrived in Hong Kong University (HKU) in September 1991, I had but a handful of days to prepare for teaching. I was presented with my timetable, which informed me that one of my courses, English for Arts Students (EAS), would include a one hour Self-Access period. I was not, at first, quite certain what this involved, but on perusal of the Teachers' Notes, I discovered that this entailed the students working in the Self-Access Centre (SAC) on material that would cater for individually identified needs within English language learning. This discovery initially quelled my fears of finding myself in a blind-leading-the-blind-situation for I was very familiar with individualised learning schemes. The fears returned, however, when I looked around the SAC and realised that I could never become familiar with all its material in just two days and that, being new to the Hong Kong education system and Hong Kong students, I was unclear as to how much guidance my students would need in order to make optimum use of the self-access facilities. This report describes my initial approach to self-access work with first year Arts students at HKU, explains my rejection of that approach and outlines my current development of Study Guides for students in line with the adoption of an approach which seeks to provide a guided independence for students.

Criterion for initial approach

In the light of my uncertainty as to the amount of guidance to give, and not wishing to make the students feel, now that they had entered a university, that they were being dictated to and treated as children, I toyed with the idea of discussing with each student their needs, as suggested by the EAS materials, and then leaving them to make their own choice of materials to fulfil these needs from what was available in the SAC. This would make them feel that they had entered the adult world of independence, I argued. But then I considered how little experience these students would have had at making choices of educational materials and decided that this in-at-the-deep-end approach would be likely to lead to a great deal of confusion and frustration and might even leave some students with a sense of being abandoned by their teacher.

Thus I opted, initially, for maximum guidance of self-access work, feeling, along with Barnett and Jordan (1991, p.308) that to let students choose freely, in the supposed interests of independence, would be "the height of folly".

Initial approach

As Trim (1976; in Sheerin 1991, p.144) noted, "It is possible to pursue individualization in a

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thoroughly authoritarian framework", and this is precisely what my students did. I assigned each student two or three activities from those listed in the EAS file of self-access materials (1991 version) on the basis of their declared needs on the EAS contract. The students then reported back to their tutorial groups at two week intervals on the activities they had completed. They gave a brief outline of the content of each activity, evaluated its usefulness in fulfilling their declared needs and stated how interesting they had found it and whether or not they would recommend it to other students. They were then assigned further work. It certainly was prescriptive.

The advantages of this approach were threefold (in fact, fourfold if you include ensuring my peace of mind that my students were not awash in a sea of choice):

a) It acquainted me fairly quickly with the contents of a wide variety of self-access materials, above and beyond the ones I investigated myself.
b) It made me aware of the students' opinions of the usefulness and interest level of the materials.
c) It ensured that the students completed a large cross-section of activities in the SAC.

The students themselves seemed quite happy with this arrangement and were, in general, eager to discuss what they had done in self-access, however I found I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the approach. As I reflected on the possibilities inherent in self-access work, it seemed that the opportunities it offered were not being fully exploited. While self-access work need not be equated with student autonomy (it can, as in my approach, be individualised but totally other-directed) it could well act as "a means of promoting learner autonomy and self-directed learning" (Sheerin, 1991, p.144) - an educational goal in itself. However, it was not acting in this way for my students; the only decision my students had to make was when to study. There was no call for students to take responsibility for the other "major decisions, such as why, what, where ...and how they are going to study" (Benson, 1992, p.31). Quite clearly, my approach in no way fostered learner autonomy.

Taking into account that at HKU English courses are offered only to first year undergraduates and students must thereafter work on English enhancement without teacher support, student autonomy in language learning is highly desirable. It would clearly be advantageous for students to be able to make productive use of self-access facilities independently. As Benson notes "self-access represents an opportunity to continue study in subsequent years" (ibid, p.31).

With all this in mind, I decided that a new approach had to be adopted. My initial approach had been quite expedient at the outset of my encounter with self-access, but I felt that the time had come to investigate possibilities which would engender more autonomy for those students who wished to be self-directing. (The very question of 'choosing' self-direction is one I intend to explore at greater length in a later paper).

A revised approach to self-access

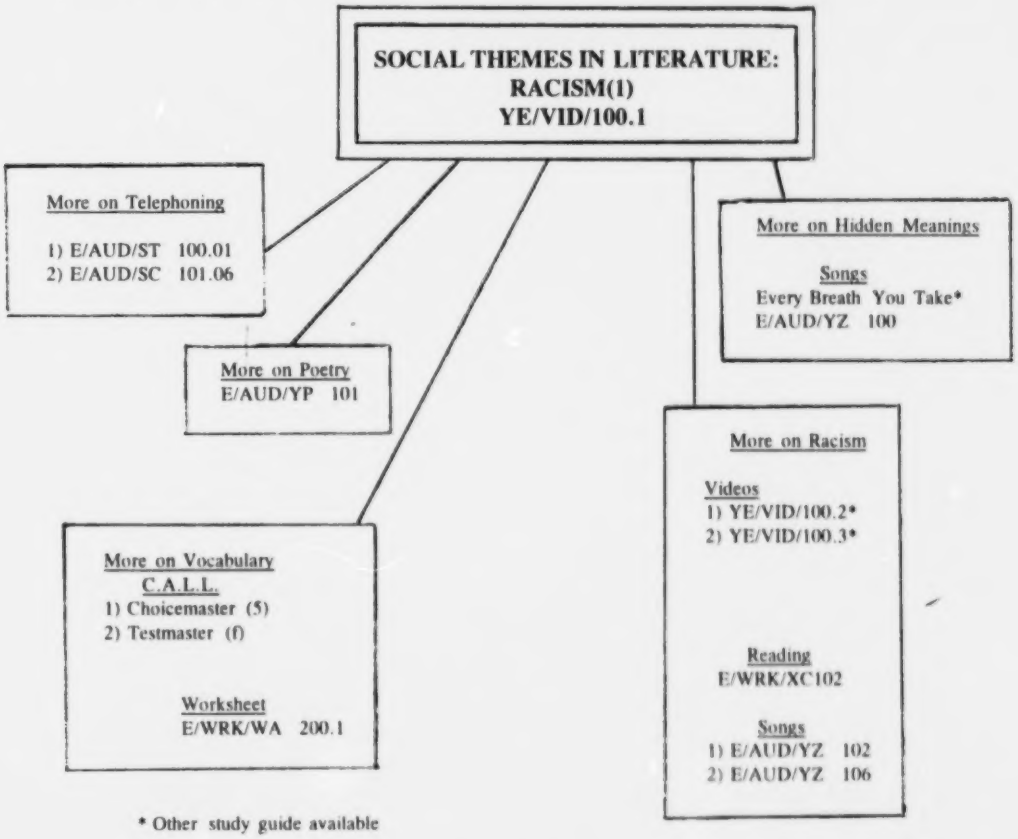
As students who use the SAC will, naturally, vary in the degree of self-direction they are able, or wish, to adopt, it is desirable that a centre should cater for a variety of approaches to learning. It was with this in mind that I decided to devise what I have called Study Guides for my students in my revised approach to self-access work. These guides take the form of diagrammatic representations of inter-related activities to be undertaken and skills to be practised within a guided framework. The first of these guides is shown below.

In devising the guides I have attempted to make provision for two broad categories of students:
a) those who are other-directed,
b) those who wish to move towards self-direction.

Perhaps I should explain before I proceed further why I have chosen the term 'study guide' rather than the more widely used 'pathway'. This is largely because the image that is generated in my mind by the term 'pathway' does not seem to fit with how I picture these schemes of work being used. I see a pathway as a scheme of work "carefully sequenced to guide learners through presentation and graded practice" (Sheerin, 1991, p.152) of one skill or one grammar point. I picture learners starting with a prescribed activity and then moving along one of a variety of paths depending upon their level of attainment in the skill practised in the first activity. Thus, a low level of attainment would lead to a path offering remedial work, a higher level to a path offering consolidation, and so on. Each path could consist of several activities or exercises leading students through the material in a SAC. The paths could be totally prescribed or could offer choices at certain points along the way. The creation of such pathways may well be worth pursuing at some future date, but it would be quite difficult to create these in the SAC at HKU given the material that is available at present.

What I have in mind for a study guide is not highly sequenced and does not lead the way along a route of graded practice. The guides rather suggest a variety of unsequenced activities which could arise, depending upon interest or need, from one central activity. The guides are meant to act as an initiation both to the variety of material available in self-access and to the idea of constructing a study programme; they do not create paths but rather they lead learners to the beginning of several paths which the learners may, or may not, choose to explore further, and they act as models for student-constructed schemes of work.

Naturally, the term 'pathways' may not generate for others the image it generates for me and they may, therefore, have no trouble in equating what I have called 'study guides' with the term 'pathways'. If this is so, let it be; a guide by any other name would show the way.



* Other study guide available

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Study guides to self-direction

Most students entering a university could probably be categorised as other-directed, where 'other' usually implies a teacher or a person of similar status viewed by the student as a figure of authority. Given the schooling experienced by the vast majority of students this is only to be expected. Those students who are self-directed are certainly a minority group. Such students will have little need of study guides for they are able to establish their own programmes of study and, with perhaps no more than an occasional consultation, work independently. It was not for those students that the study guides I constructed were intended. My main objective was to introduce those other-directed students who wish to become independent to the idea of self-directed study. The study guides are intended to serve as paradigms to explain to students one way of creating a personal learning programme based on individual interests and continuous self-assessment of needs.

Perhaps the easiest way to explain how the guides can be used would be to give a step by step description of how I proceeded with the sample guide shown above. The first activity was used in a classroom session as an introduction to self-access work. This activity involved watching a videoed reading of a poem by Wole Soyinka on the theme of racism. The poem for the most part takes the form of a telephone conversation. This led to a general discussion on the theme of racism and then, for homework, the class completed the worksheet accompanying the video which had gap-filling, comprehension and vocabulary exercises and questions on hidden meanings.

In their next tutorial we discussed the advisability of approaching self-access work systematically rather than randomly choosing material with the vague aim of "improving my English" - a course of action which could well lead to "a sense of not having accomplished anything" (Barnett and Jordan, 1991, p.308). We discussed several possible ways of planning work and selecting material, based on:

a) interest in a certain subject,
b) a perceived weakness, either self-assessed or teacher-directed, and a consequent need to improve in a certain area,
c) a wish to consolidate a particular language strength.

After this I asked the students to think about the worksheet they had done on the Wole Soyinka poem and to decide, bearing in mind the bases for selection that we had discussed, what kind of self-access work they would do next. Fifty percent of the students chose to work on vocabulary building, citing difficulties with understanding the vocabulary of the video or with completing the vocabulary exercise on the worksheet. Another six (out of a total of twenty eight) chose to study more about racism, as they were interested in the theme and did not feel that any of the exercises on the worksheet had posed enough difficulties to indicate a weakness in those areas. All the students had found the exercise on hidden meanings very difficult, but only one thought it was interesting or important enough to follow up. Two more students wanted to look at some more poetry.

Four students said they could not decide what to do because they had found everything difficult, particularly listening to the video. I suggested that it might be a good idea for those students to watch other videos or listen to audio cassettes on the same theme as the original activity, as familiarity with the subject matter might make the task of listening somewhat easier.

This left only one student who claimed to have had no difficulty with any of the work and was not interested in the theme. Although I suggested other work for this student, based on her declared interest in Business English, she did not complete the activity and, in fact, rarely attended tutorials. As this student admitted, when pressed, that she considered self-access "a waste of time", I did not pursue the use of study guides with her, but asked her to complete the course-related self-access. She claimed to consider these "more relevant" to her studies.

When the students had decided what kind of work to do, I presented them with the study guide

and asked them to complete one or two activities from their chosen branch before the next tutorial. They could also complete activities from another branch if motivated to do so.

In this way, following further consultations with students, both in person and via comments in their self-access record books, on what had proved useful and/or interesting, the first semester was completed. By the end of that semester all but two students had completed at least five activities from the guide, apart from the original class-based activity.

It may at first sight seem that such a study guide contributes little towards the declared aim of encouraging self-direction. There appears to have been very little that was not directed by the teacher. This is to some extent true, but the progress towards self-direction should, in my opinion, be very gradual. The 'how' (depending upon your interpretation of 'how') and 'where' of studying were still teacher-directed, but the students did, in fact, choose not only when to study, but why (not in absolute terms, of course, but in terms of why 'vocabulary' rather than 'hidden meanings') and, within defined limits, what to study. Some would claim, I suppose, that there was, in reality, complete teacher control as the original choice of activity was the teacher's. For this intervention I make no apology. With students en route for self-direction, I feel that intervention is necessary and this view seems to have become widely accepted. Sheerin (1991) has noted that:

> the rather severe early view of learner responsibility and the non-interventionist approach to learner autonomy have in recent years given way to a more pragmatic and realistic acceptance of and respect for learners as they really are (p.151).

Intervention, in the form of choice of initial activity, is crucial. It is from this root that all the follow-up work stems. In order for students to practise making choices, the first activity must lead to a range of choices to be made; it must have several facets that could be exploited. For this reason, the ideal activity is one accompanied by a purpose-designed worksheet which guides students' attention in several directions.

The advantage of such an activity is that the worksheet exercises enable students to assess their performance in several areas (or enable teachers to do so) and this assessment can form the basis for their follow-on activity. My contention is, though there have been numerous contradictory studies on this issue (see Sheerin, 1991, p.153 for details on this), that students are often rather unreliable, perhaps through inexperience, at assessing their own needs, in terms of language improvement, without being faced with the concrete results of an exercise that they could not do well. In the case of HKU students, for example, "Learners themselves do not often rate reading as one of their major areas of difficulty" (Allison and Ip, 1991, p.33). However, in my experience, the students tend to over-estimate their abilities in this area and this impression seems to be supported by the results of Allison and Ip's studies which "suggest that students' reading problems are more serious and persistent than might have been anticipated" (op. cit. p.44). Perhaps if students were faced with a poor performance on a reading comprehension exercise alongside a good performance on a listening task on the same worksheet they would begin to question their original impression of their priorities. It is in order to encourage students to consider their priorities that a range of possible outcomes from the initial activity is essential. And, thus, teacher intervention in the choice of this activity is advisable.

Intervention is also necessary to explain the construction of the study guides so that students can use them as models to devise their own learning programmes where each activity is related to something that has gone before and is chosen on the basis of a need or interest which has arisen from an earlier activity. In this way the students can begin to learn what can be exploited from any activity and how their own interests or strengths and weaknesses can be used to decide upon where to go next.

There are some teachers who will perhaps question how choosing the interest direction on a study guide can be justified pedagogically. I consider that the motivational factor is ample justification

for following interest in a particular theme. Some students will assimilate far more vocabulary for instance, from watching a video on a subject which interests them than from completing an exercise designed specifically to build up vocabulary. This is especially the case where the 'motivation' of success in examinations is absent from the picture.

Student-generated guides

The idea behind study guides is that students can use them as models of how to plan their own schemes of work. They are meant primarily to be an initiation to self-direction. This being the case, at the end of the first semester, I asked my students to try to produce their own study guides. This met with varying degrees of success.

There were only two pairs of students who had grasped the idea of how to construct guides really well and they created multi-faceted schemes of work, with three or four branches each. These guides, with only slight modifications, could easily be used by others in the SAC and I intend to make them available for future students with acknowledgements to their authors. Using student-generated work could possibly encourage other students to create personal learning schemes, by example, and might foster a greater sense of involvement in the creation of work schemes if it was felt that they could be useful to other learners. These students had been able to select an activity which gave rise to a variety of follow-up work and had, for the most part, chosen suitable material to begin branches which might later be continued, if interest and/or need were apparent.

One of these guides started with an audio tape on youth culture which gave rise to branches on youth culture (the theme), note-taking (the main skill practised) and listening (the main activity). The second guide had a video on gifted children as a starting point, which led to branches on psychology and education (the main themes), vocabulary (following on a worksheet exercise) and note-taking (identified as useful for completing the tasks although not highlighted on the worksheet as the main skill).

Eight other students produced topic-based guides where video and audio activities built around one theme were suggested. These guides could also be used by future students, but I feel that they might not prove quite so useful once a database is installed in the SAC as this will make it relatively simple for all students to locate material on any theme in which they are interested. A ready-made study guide will, of course, save the students the time required to make the search and it could be argued that this is spoon-feeding and will only encourage laziness rather than independence. However, it could, conversely, be argued that any means of making materials easily accessible will encourage SAC use and, therefore, be a potential activator of further study.

The remainder of the students did not produce anything resembling the original study guide. Several decided to continue working on courses, eg. Situational Dialogues, to which they had been introduced on the 'telephoning branch' of the guide. Others decided to follow up work on the study guide built up around the two other videos suggested on the 'racism branch'. Only a handful of students chose material totally at random. (At least, it seemed random to me as I found it quite difficult to ascertain what the connections between the activities could possibly be.) Insofar as very few usable study guides were produced, this experiment could not be described as a success. However, in terms of what I learnt from it, the exercise was extremely worthwhile.

It was quite clear from the results that the students varied considerably (which, of course, is not a surprise) as to the degree of self-direction they were able or willing to adopt. Those who produced their own guides were clearly much further down the road to autonomy than their classmates. Upon discussion with those students who did not produce guides, it transpired that those who had chosen material seemingly at random had not really understood the idea of being systematic in producing a scheme of work, which tends to indicate that not only was my explanation unsatisfactory, but also that

far more practice with established guides is necessary for some students before they can be expected to attempt to devise personal learning programmes.

Those students who had followed established courses stated that they had understood what they were supposed to do but had chosen to follow courses, accepting the need for a systematic approach, either because planning a study guide was too time-consuming or because they had found it too difficult, without guidance, both to choose an initial activity that could generate several branches and to choose material to fit the branches. Many of this group said that they would have preferred to have been given a ready-made guide from which they could have chosen which activities to complete and they would have preferred more frequent discussions with the teacher on their self-access activities rather than to be left for four or five weeks (this was the time they were given to produce a guide) to work on self-access on their own.

Perhaps the most important lesson that I learnt, or maybe it was more a suspicion that I had confirmed, was that some of the first year students at HKU are unwilling or are not yet ready (and this could be the most crucial point of all) to adopt a completely self-directed approach to language learning. Perhaps they lack the necessary maturity, or the necessary self-discipline, or the necessary motivation, or the necessary time commitment to become self-directing. Whatever the reason, these students choose not to be autonomous in their language learning and it is, therefore, necessary for guidance of some kind to be made available to them.

Study guides for other-directed students

For those students who do not choose autonomy but prefer to remain other-directed, study guides cannot act as models for constructing their own learning programmes as it is not their desire for them to do so, but this does not mean that the guides cannot be useful to them. For those students a guide can act as "an attractive and immediately accessible way of enabling students to experience in a tangible way the possibilities available to them" (Sheerin, 1991, p.152). In other words, it provides them with a ready-made programme of activities which, when completed, can give them a sense of achievement and, hopefully, along the way will lead to some improvement in at least one aspect of English Language learning. A guide such as the example shown could provide a student with eight hours or so of self-access work if the whole guide was completed, during which time the student would have been exposed to a wide variety of English and would have practised a range of skills. The work could give students some sense of freedom (even a student who does not wish to be self-directing in terms of choosing materials most probably appreciates this) in that after the first activity they can choose in what order to complete the remaining activities. This freedom allows them to plan their self-access work according to the time they have available on different occasions: a small, but perhaps valuable, opportunity to practise some time-management.

The guide could quite successfully be used by a student who does not have access to any kind of teacher-input or advice, as an explanatory sheet accompanies the guides and all those activities with worksheets have answer keys. The guides then become rather like programmed learning materials where "many of the management tasks undertaken by the teacher are built into the materials" (Dickinson, 1981. Cited in Sheerin, 1991, p.150). This is, in fact, how Dickinson believes that self-access materials need to be designed when self-access is undertaken by learners who are not self-directed. The guides can basically replace a taught programme (the teacher being indirectly present through suggestions and answer key); they offer a measure of security to students working alone who do not have the confidence, or maybe desire, to create their own schemes of work.

One great advantage of students using a study guide is that they may be encouraged to try activities which they would not have tried without the suggestion being made and this prevents the students getting into the rut of using only one of the many facilities available. A guide may also introduce

them to an activity which is part of a series or to another study guide (by cross-referencing) and this could lead to a decision to veer off from the guide to complete more of that series or to move to another guide. This might be one step, however small, towards a more self-directed approach.

Study guides and teachers

Study Guides are intended primarily to be used by students. They can profitably be used by those who wish to move towards self-direction as jumping off blocks from which they can practise making choices and become aware of how making connections can allow purposeful study, and by other-directed learners as easily accessible, ready-made schemes of work. And perhaps they can also profitably be used by teachers.

Those teachers who are sceptical about the possibility of student self-direction may find themselves using the self-access section of their courses as a time for classroom-assigned projects or course-related homework based on material in the SAC. This is, of course, a perfectly legitimate use of self-access time, but, if it is the only use made of the SAC, it may perhaps prevent the development of self-direction in those students who are willing and able to progress towards autonomy. After all, although we say 'you can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink', it is equally true that if you don't take the horse to water, it doesn't have the opportunity to drink. And it may take it a long time to find the water by itself. Possibly teachers may find study guides useful in providing for the needs of those students who wish to become self-directed, whilst at the same time accommodating those students who wish to remain other-directed and satisfying the teacher's desire to ensure that all of them do undertake self-access work and are, therefore, exposed to a wide variety of learning opportunities.

Teachers can use the guides in various ways. It would be possible to assign the same guide to a whole class allowing students to work through it at her own pace, checking the worksheets when completed. It would also be possible to allow students, individually, in pairs or in small groups, to choose different guides and to choose how many of the activities on each guide to complete. Another possibility would be to begin by assigning guides and then, gradually, to encourage students to veer off along one of the branches, following consultation with the teacher. All teachers, except, naturally, those who find study guides too controlling of student choice behaviour, would probably be able to find a way of utilising these guides that suits their own views on guidance and choice.

Conclusion

Devising study guides involves a considerable investment of time, perhaps as much in the creation and organising of the materials upon which the guides are based as in the drawing up of the guides themselves, and for this investment to be worthwhile the guides should be able to be profitably used by as large a number of people as possible. This aim can only be achieved if the guides can allow a variety of approaches to suit individual learners.

The same could, in fact, be said of a SAC itself. There is no 'best' way to approach self-access. Users must decide for themselves how to make optimum use of the facilities available. And by 'users' here I refer to teachers as well as students. Amongst the facilities on offer are study guides. They can be used in a variety of ways to suit a variety of approaches to learning. As such, hopefully, they can make self-access a valuable experience for all who choose to use them.

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